DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 434 CS 214 594

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TITLE Developing a Multiperspective Viewpoint for Written Argumentation: The Case for Casebooks.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Spring Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (Portland, OR, March 10-12, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Writing; Higher Education; *Student Needs; Writing Improvement
IDENTIFIERS Basic Writers; *Casebooks; Discourse; Ferris State University MI

ABSTRACT

Students in a basic writing course at Ferris State University, an open-admissions, career-technical institution, are required to buy "The Family in America," a casebook in the Opposing Viewpoints Series. The book is suitable for a student who is struggling to write on a high school level and does not have the basic educational background to understand classic essays like, "A Modest Proposal" and "Politics of the English Language." When students complain, "I'm not interested in the family in America, the proper response (in more diplomatic terms, of course) is "What's your point?" From a teaching and work point of view, students need to learn that performance of a task and interest in it have no necessary relationship. On a strictly intellectual level, by the end of the semester, the students have learned, among other things, that: (1) regarding a particular issue, a conversation--a discourse--is always going on in academia; (2) an individual text does not have biblical status, it is just part of the conversation; and (3) to produce a good paper, writers need to see multiple parts of the conversation--the context. Casebooks can be adapted to a wide variety of teaching styles and writing courses and should be considered for use. (TB)

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ED 375 434

Developing a Multiperspective Viewpoint for Written Argumentation: The Case for Casebooks

I teach in a situation that is perhaps familiar to many in this room today--a situation that is typical, I suspect, across the United States. Ferris is an open-admissions career-technical institution with a mixture of associate, baccalaureate, and professional programs. Every undergraduate must complete two lower division three-semester-hour writing courses. Students with writing skills below the eighth grade level must complete an 0-level course prior to taking English 150. All baccalaureate students must complete a 300-level writing course in order to graduate.

The typical students who comes to Ferris are also familiar figures to many of you--they are average high school graduates, which means they read, write, and calculate at the eighth grade level. They know a great deal about popular culture but little else; to many of them, the founder of Lutheranism was a black man from Georgia. They are "nice kids"--passive, more open to persuasion than logic, generally non-confrontational, and accustomed to a system that asks little of them other than that they not be disruptive. All of this is documented in, among other places, the works of John Goodlad and Theodore Sizer.

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Because the pool of eighteen year-olds is small right now, we have an increasing number of students with even slighter academic preparation and even less aptitude for study. An educational and social system whose features are well known to this audience has given both these groups anti-educational attitudes. It has also carefully shielded them from understanding the relationship that now exists between one's educational level and one's work prospects. Since college is the place where many of them discover this relationship for the first time, their anger at having been deluded is frequently focused on their current teachers--us.

Our job--and by "we" I mean Ferris and higher education faculty and institutions collectively--is to prepare these students to function in the workplace and give them the basis of career and personal growth. Matthew Fox, among many other observers, has pointed out the centrality of work in contemporary American culture.

My job in this great enterprise, or at least the aspect of it I want to focus on today, is to teach English 250--the sophomore-level writing course in research and argumentation. My task in English 250, although it is simply described, is not simple: my students enter English 250 with 9th-10th grade writing skills. To pass my class, they need to learn to write like high school seniors. With these writing skills, they can earn an associate degree. To acquire those skills they need to learn to reason, to analyze arguments, to persuade, to identify audiences--I could go on, and so could you.

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For this reason, in addition to the handbook I require in all my classes, writing or literature, I require the students to buy a casebook. Currently I am using THE FAMILY IN AMERICA, a book in Greenhaven Press' Opposing Viewpoints Series. For many years I used readers with selections on contemporary problems, enduring issues, and classic essays like "A Modest Proposal" and "Politics and the English Language." I no longer use these readers; my students lack the background to understand their contents. In fact, when they enter the course, most of my students lack the background to write about anything but themselves and their own (unsupported) opinions, and I avoid personal writing assignments because to focus on personal writing does the students a disservice and is contrary to the goals of the course.

With such goals and such students, I have to supply a context, something to write about. The students have to read and write about it for an entire semester, or their knowledge base will be too superficial. One might let the students choose their own topics, but if the individual students write about topics that are too broadly different, then collaboration and sharing become more difficult, and these are important in the writing classroom.

The major complaint I receive from my students is, "I'm not interested in THE FAMILY IN AMERICA." The proper response to this is a diplomatic version of, "What's your point?" From a teaching and work point of view, students need to learn that performance of a task and interest in it have no necessary relationship.

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In a semester, I require four papers written from sources, each more sophisticated than its predecessor. Since the early papers suffer not only from the students' lack of familiarity with the topic, but also from their inexperience in the conventions of writing from sources, I encourage the students to revise them. The last two papers show what seems to be sudden improvement, but it is actually the result of simultaneous and accretive mastery of the skills of research, reading, self- and peer-editing, arguing and writing.

You can probably tell that I have, as we like to say in education, affective as well as cognitive goals in teaching English 250. On a strictly intellectual level, by the end of the semester, the students have learned, among other things, that (1) regarding a particular issue, a conversation--a discourse--is always going on in academia, the press, television, and other places; (2) an individual text does not have biblical status--it is just part of the conversation; and (3) to produce a good paper, writers need to see multiple parts of the conversation--the context.

Casebooks can be adapted to a wide variety of teaching styles and writing courses. They supply a subject matter for reading, discussion, further research, and writing. They are especially valuable for unreflective students who have never been challenged and who have a limited fund of general knowledge. Consider using casebooks for your students.

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